

## **CAPITALIST REALISM**

### **An Interview with Mark Fisher**

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**Interview conducted by Richard Capes for [www.moretht.blogspot.com](http://www.moretht.blogspot.com)**

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R = Richard Capes

M = Mark Fisher

***R: Hello. My name is Richard Capes, and this is a [moretht.blogspot.com](http://www.moretht.blogspot.com) interview with writer, theorist and teacher Mark Fisher about his book 'Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?'***

***Okay, Mark, my first question is: What is capitalist realism?***

M: You'd think I'd be able to answer this very quickly. But in fact it's easier to spot than it is to define, I think, capitalist realism. There's various different ways of looking at it. One is looking at it as a belief, a belief that capitalism is the only viable political economic system. That's one sense of the realism – that anything else is unrealistic. And it's often what you hear people say if one is critical of capitalism – they'll say, 'Well it might not be the best system, but it's the only one that works.' One can think of it as a belief, but it's also an attitude, an attitude in relation to that belief, an attitude of resignation and defeat. So I suppose that what I'm talking about with capitalist realism is not so much the attitude propagated by this kind of neoliberal right. It's more how the success of the neoliberal right transforms the attitudes of the general population, and especially of the left I think. But of course the problem with talking about beliefs or attitudes is it implies a kind of individual psychological perspective. What we're talking about here is the kind of collective psychic infrastructure, I'd say – a kind of diffuse ideological atmosphere, and the way in which those beliefs are instituted across all areas of life in a country like the UK: from the media through to the workplace, through to our own unconscious attitudes.

***R: When and how did capitalist realism emerge?***

M: I think you're looking at the 80s as the key period of transition really. We're looking at a kind of synergy between ideology and the restructuring of capitalism - the restructuring of capitalism from so-called Fordism to post-Fordism, Fordism being the sort of dominant form of capitalism in the West, in the post-war period, which was based on a kind of compact of stability, where the working class was offered security in exchange for boredom. Where most towns would have one or two major industrial enterprises, most of the male workers would expect to work in those industries their whole working life. But they could expect minor incremental improvements in their standard of living

over that working period. This sort of fell apart in the 70s when the world that we're now familiar with - so familiar, in fact, that we take it for granted - the world of post-Fordist capitalism started to emerge.

What are key terms of post-Fordist capitalism? The dread word 'flexibility', which, in terms of the worker, tends to cash out of what's called 'precarity', i.e. constant conditions of instability and insecurity, short-term employment, casualisation. And of course that goes alongside some of the other key developments of post-Fordism, such as digitisation of the work-place, just-in-time production, and, of course, globalization. So the re-structuring of capitalism in this way caught labour on the back-foot, labour as in the worker's movement as well as in the Labour party. The key problem I think articulated by the most forward-thinking of the left groups in the 70s and 80s - including the sort of the autonomous in Italy and what's called the 'New Times' group around Marxism today in the UK - was, 'How could the left hegemonize post-Fordism?', 'How could the left produce it's own version of post-Fordism?' And I think the failure of that - the failure to meet that challenge - accounts for a lot of the failure of the left.

On the one hand we have the restructuring of capitalism along the lines of post-Fordism. But what's key to that, of course, is that this just wasn't something that was simply imposed by capital on workers; it was in many ways driven by the desires of workers - workers who simply didn't find enticing a life of boredom for forty years in a factory, who wanted more freedom. I think the key issue now is, in a way, the discrepancy between what they did want and what they actually got. I think that's where opportunities lie for the left, actually.

But coming back to 'Where did capitalist realism emerge?' - well, 'When and how did it emerge?' It was that the right successfully harnessed those desires - the anti-authoritarian currents that came out from the 60s. The left I think failed to come up with a convincing model of an anti-authoritarian left. Energies that were released by the kind of struggles against capitalism on the left then became diverted into this neo-liberal project, which, in the 80s, had two faces. On the one level there was inducement. In the UK we saw this in the form of, particularly, the selling off of council houses. It was a really good move by Thatcher in lots of ways, because it immediately positioned the whole of the post-war social-democratic project as sort of being out-of-date, top-down, bureaucratic, and kind of Thatcherite neoliberalism as being about the future, the future that would deliver choice to individuals, which would deliver freedom away from the strictures of the state. A whole array of things happened in the UK, of course, privatisation. Again, privatisation was articulated in terms of giving people choices: 'You too can now own shares!' Alongside these carrots, of course, there was a lot of stick with the destruction of the unions, or the effective destruction of the unions.

The miners' strike is the most powerfully symbolic image of the end of the worker's movement. I think when we think about that - when we think about the miners' strike - that gives us the most kind of vivid sense of how deeply established capitalist realism was by the middle of the 80s, and certainly by the end of the 80s. By the end of the 80s we were in a situation that would have seemed science-fictional from the perspective of the middle of the 70s. If you told people that all of the national utilities would be sold off and privatised, that the mining union which had just brought down the conservative government would be sort of defeated in abeyance, that the unions were simply not major players in public life anymore - that would have seemed unimaginable. Yet it happened, and it happened in a relatively short time.

If the 80s were the sort of battleground - in retrospect it seemed like there was only one way that battle was going to go. In the 80s, of course, things seemed different. It didn't seem inevitable that neoliberalism would triumph. In retrospect the success of neoliberalism seems to have been overdetermined. But by the 90s, I think, the key moment, of course, is the arrival and election of New Labour, which was the final victory for Thatcherite neoliberalism – where the Labour party could come in, essentially accepting the broad framework that had been imposed by neoliberals. I think then we enter into the kind of phase of capitalist realism which most of the book is devoted to analysing I suppose.

***R: How has capitalism persuaded us that it's the only 'realistic' political-economic system?***

M: One way of getting to this is by forcing ritualistic compliance, where there's no other available language or conceptual model for how we understand life, work, or society, except that of business. And that's one of the key things that happened in that period, particularly with public services – and that's something I dwell on at some length in the book 'Capitalist Realism'. It's the extent to which teachers are now required to go through these self-surveillance procedures, these self-assessment procedures, which have been imported in from business, and the strange subjective disavowal comes with these procedures often - managers who are uncomfortable imposing kind of business rhetoric, business methods, nevertheless will say to workers, say to teachers, 'You don't have to believe in this, but this is what we have to do now. We have to go along with this kind of thing.' And that sense that one has to go along with practices and languages coming in from business – I think that that is a key part of this sense that there is no alternative - that this is how things are done now - and there's no other way around it.

I think that in addition to what I said earlier are a kind of crushing of the previous forms of working class solidarity. Well, a crushing - I guess it's better to talk about decomposition really, in lots of ways, because it wasn't simply, as I said, about capital hammering trade unions. It's that trade unions hadn't – trade unions in the form they had developed – had to fit with the Fordist mode of organization, and as post-Fordism emerged, as Fordism fell apart – as I say, partly driven by the desires of workers – trade unions and other aspects of the labour movement failed to move with it. The effect of that is this kind of generalised atomisation, I think – a kind of collective depression, which isn't experienced collectively, because nothing is, actually.

But where between the individual and the state – there's nothing in the space anymore. The space that trade unions used to occupy – well, people could feel then a direct connection between their own working lives and a wider political world and have some sense of agency because of that. That space was gone and people were...there's this process of what I've called the 'privatization of stress' or general psychic privatization. You get to own your own home, but your home becomes this place of refuge and consolation in a world where – because outside it public space is massively denuded. And it's this decline of a public space which we can have any connection with. And it massively contributes to this sense that there's no alternative to the way things are.

***R: You argue in the book that capitalist realism is immune to moral criticism. Could you explain why?***

M: It's no use just talking about greed and these categories. There's this kind of embedded Hobbesianism with capitalist realism. Part of capitalist realism is: 'that's the way the world is.' And that involves: 'Well, people are naturally competitive'. If there's widespread greed, or if this is appealed to as a notion – 'Well, the reason there was a bank crash was because of greedy bankers' – that won't undermine capitalist realism, it'll feed into it. It will feed into it in the sense that that kind of resignation, cynicism are part of the background of capitalist realism anyway. It also misses the target, I think.

The problem with late capitalism is not the greed of capitalists. That's the difference between a Marxist analysis and an ethical one – the Marxist one will focus on systems, forms of organization are central. Capitalism is not bad because CEOs are uniquely evil. It's the other way around. Anyone who's in the position of CEO would act as CEOs do. It's just a systemic pressure that produces that kind of behaviour. Part of the problem is that we are looking at systemic tendencies here. It's archaic and kind of folk-psychological to focus on these categories which we think apply in everyday life, like more responsibility, to this kind of inhuman system. The scale of what we're up against is obfuscated by a focus on the ethical.

***R: You also talk about 'recycling' as another way in which our attention is deflected from a real problem.***

M: Isn't recycling a classic case of: 'We assume responsibility for the systemic tendencies of capitalism'? It's not really our fault that there is an environmental catastrophe. The thing it is nobody's fault, you can say, in a genuine sense, but that is the problem – because there is no agent capable of acting. There's no agent at the moment that's capable of taking responsibility for a problem on the scale of the environmental catastrophe that we're facing. Instead, it's contracted out to us as individuals as if we could do anything about it by simply putting plastic in the right bin. That won't solve the environmental catastrophe that we're up against. The only thing that can solve it is the production of an agent capable of acting. But of course nothing like that has ever existed throughout human history until now – which doesn't mean it can't exist, but that we're in very new territory. That appeal to individual responsibility, as if aggregating up enough individual responsibility will substitute the need for this kind of agent. That's one of the pernicious dimensions of the culture behind recycling.

***R: Towards the end of the first chapter you argue that gangster films like 'Goodfellas' and 'Pulp Fiction' offer visions of the world that promote capitalism or reinforce capitalist realism. Could you explain how they do that because they're often seen as offering a very gritty, realistic portrait of modern life?***

M: Exactly. It's because of that though, isn't it? What do we mean by realism? That's very much at stake. I think Elroy also talks about – I think Elroy is an interesting case because he's pretty open about it in the political dimension of it. Elroy's project in something like 'American Tabloid', where he wants to take down all of these images of kind of American liberal politicians and expose the kind of seedy acquisitiveness behind the veneer – Elroy's quite open about this as a cultural-political project. This sense of precisely what is realistic. What is realistic? That people are competitive, they naturally struggle against one another, that the real world of the streets is described by this kind of micro-capitalist – not even micro often – struggle between warring families or warring interest

groups – quite clearly this will feed into capitalist realism, I think, in lots of levels: in the assumption of individualism, the assumption of competition, also what has disappeared from that picture - which is any kind of public world.

***R: Would you say the American TV series ‘The Wire’ is a work of capitalist realism?***

M: It's a fascinating parallel with the book, I think, in that, in lots of ways it's very similar to 'Capitalist Realism'. What is the difference between that and large swathes of gangster rap or Elroy is the implicit critique in it, isn't it? There's a celebration with Elroy or gangster rap – 'this not just how things are, but there's something good about the fact they're like this actually, and that we need to be positive about disillusionment'. Behind 'The Wire', despite this sense of massive institutional inertia, and just the impasses of politics, the fact that however hard individuals try to act the system has either a way of subsuming them or eliminating them – although that could be dispirited, in the same way that 'Capitalist Realism' could be dispiriting (and some people do read it in that way), for me the message of 'The Wire' is very similar to the message of 'Capitalist Realism', that this is what we're up against now. That was how things were pre-2008. Of course one of the many things that interests me about 'The Wire' is the emphasis that's placed on post-Fordist bureaucracy, the same as I place it in 'Capitalist Realism' – on the way that kind of target culture has this inherent kind of skewing of facts, the sinister alliance between managerialism and target culture, in the way that it sort of blocks out initiative and also prevents people from doing their job in a way that you'd think they ought to be doing it.

On the face of it you'd think with 'The Wire' – yeah, it's a negative message, and to that extent it would reinforce capitalist realism. The second series about containerisation, about the decline, the diminishment of the old forms of labour, and their replacement with this kind of post-Fordist robotics-computerization – is very flat with the themes of 'Capitalist Realism' the book. But I see it more as describing or rather anatomizing – diagramming – capitalist realism, rather than it actually reinforcing it, because it quite plainly lacks that element of celebration. It does also lack resignation, even though it does seem to be a seamless world from which there is no escape. The very fact it exists is a form of refusal of resignation, I think. Showing the sheer systematicity of these processes is something other than simply being resigned to them in everyday life and work.

***R: You mentioned the phrase ‘privatization of stress’ earlier in the interview. Could you talk about your experience of this when you worked as a teacher in further education?***

M: F.E. in the UK used to be the place where students who didn't really get on that well with conventional education - where they would go for a slightly different approach. I started teaching there the early part of the 2000s, and one could already see that ethos under threat and it became, increasingly as the decade wore on, as the kind of Blairite business agenda came to dominate life at college more and more. Partly what I mean by the 'privatization of stress' in relation to education is that people are required to become their own workers. There's a trick that's been played by neoliberalism which we've all succumbed to more or less - which is the idea that bureaucracy is in the past, bureaucracy belongs to this old statist, heavy, top-down, centralised world and we're glad to be rid of it.

But of course, when we think about what our working lives involve now, I'd say for many people it involves more bureaucracy, not less. The difference is that the kind of bureaucratic surveillance is not performed by external parties; it's increasingly performed by us. We have to fill in 50 or 60 page logbooks; we have to fill in endless detailed documents assessing our own performance. But this is part of a sort of wider privatization of stress, which is that we're invited to take responsibility for the additional stresses that an increased work load and decreased security bring to bear on us. Since trade unions are no longer as effective as they were, our first recourse often when we're put under extra stress is not to complain to a trade union or get them to act on our behalf but to go to a doctor and get anti-depressants, or if we're 'lucky' – in inverted commas – get therapy. The rise of depression amongst the general population, particularly amongst the young, is, I think, a symptom of this privatization of stress.

***R: In the book you say that in Britain “depression is now the condition most treated by the NHS”.***

M: As far as I'm aware that's still the case. I haven't checked out the statistics recently, but I can't imagine that in the period we're in at the moment depression has decreased amongst the population. What struck me about this was, 'Why is this acceptable? Why, particularly in a period in which we can look back now and see as a period of boom – why in this period of so-called boom were so many people, particularly young people, why were so many of them depressed? Doesn't this indicate some fundamental kind of affective problem with late capitalism?' It seems to me that one aspect of the privatization of stress is there's not an availability of a kind of cultural language of disaffection and discontent, particularly for the young, I think. And one of the interesting things about the last year or so, with the student militancy at the end of 2010 and the riots this year, is this kind of eruption of a negativity, which I don't think was available to young people in lots of ways in the high pomp of capitalist realism.

***R: In the book you talk about students suffering from ‘depressive hedonia’. Could you tell us what this is?***

M: I was talking about the students I was teaching – so they were younger teenagers...not that young, I suppose: 16-19. Not undergraduates. This does seem to strike a chord with them actually. Many of the people who write to me about the book, younger people, think that that captures something about their experience. Depressive hedonia would be just a way of thinking about the form that depression takes in a world where stimulus is always available, I think. I don't think we've remotely got to grips with the affective consequences of the kind of cyberspace-matrix that the young especially are embedded in.

Part of what I'm describing in the book really is the tensions between a kind of crumbling disciplinary framework – in which teachers are there as these prison-guards of this collapsing system. – Well, on the one hand they are prison guards. On the other hand, they're required to interface with this constant world of stimulus, and be entertainers. – There's a tension between being a prison guard and an entertainer – it's pretty difficult to say the least. In terms of depressive hedonia, depression is usually described as a case of anhedonia, where the sufferer of depression is unable to derive pleasure from anything. It seemed to me that there's almost an opposite syndrome in place with teenagers, where pleasure is so easily available that, well, that it's this very availability of pleasure

that's depressing in many cases. I guess there's a kind of consumer model of pleasure which is involved, which doesn't build up people's sense of self-esteem, sense of well-being, or perhaps more importantly a sense of involvement in things. Instead of that you've got this kind of rapid-fire small bursts of pleasure. And one of things that's removed by this is a kind of productive boredom.

The existential crisis posed by boredom in the 70s – when you really could be bored, when there wasn't a seamless stimulus-matrix available – I think there's a big relation between that – the availability of a certain kind of boredom – and phenomena like punk. The availability of constant low-level stim in 21st century culture precludes that kind of boredom, precludes alienation in a certain way, but produces this kind of general feeling of unacknowledged disaffection I think. These forms of stimulation are not really capable of engaging people in a way that takes them out and beyond themselves. People are sort of trapped in themselves in this form of kind of functional misery, in a sense that they're just miserable enough, as it were, miserable enough to carry on – not too miserable that they would either reach a point of subjective destitution or just have to question – pushed to the point where they have to question the general social causes for why they're like this. So I think it's just enough pleasure to keep them depressed as it were. That's one way of looking at depressive hedonia.

But of course one of the great things that's happened over the last year or so, that's significant though, is the student protests at the end of 2010. It was students who lead this. There's a sense there of what I was looking for or hoping for when I was writing 'Capitalist Realism' – that these forms of unacknowledged disavowed discontent would convert into forms of public anger. What was so exciting about the student protests was seeing that process start. Because I think a lot of the older people are much more in that mode that I was describing earlier of kind of resignation. I don't think there's many people are fans of or enthusiastic supporters of the coalition government, but I suspect the general attitude is, 'Well, there's not much we can do about this.' – In other words, a form of capitalist realism. What we saw with the young is a kind of challenging of that in a very dramatic way.

***R: In a talk you gave about 'Capitalist Realism' earlier this year you called for the development of a 'leftist psychotherapy'. Could you explain what you mean by this?***

M: This is really serious, I think. Since there are so many people who are depressed – and I maintain that the cause for much of this depression is social and political – then converting that depression into a political anger is an urgent political project. Of course it's not only about that. It's also about levels of real distress and suffering in society, which can not be handled or dealt with by the individualising, privatised assumptions of the dominant forms of treatment in mental illness, which are, in this country, cognitive behavioural therapy – which is a kind of combination of positive thinking and kind of psychoanalysis light: the focus on family background of the sufferer, and on then of converting thought patterns from these negative into positive ones. There's that. And on the other hand, brain chemistry focus – the horrible loop whereby massive multinational pharmaceutical companies sell people drugs in order to cure them from the stresses brought about by working in late capitalism. Neither of these things are very effective – all they do is largely contain people's depression rather than actually deal with the actual cause of depression.

One can apply Marx's arguments about religion very directly to this – that religion was the opium of the masses. Anti-depressants and therapy are the opium of the masses now, in lots of ways. That isn't to say that they don't do anything at all. They do in many cases relieve intense suffering, which people are undergoing. But it's just the same as religion. As Marx said, it'll make people better in a kind of savage and pitiless world – religion wants real comfort to people in the same way, in a world of relentless competition, of digital hyper-stress, etc. Being able to talk to someone for an hour in cognitive behavioural therapy or having something which will take the edge of things via anti-depressants – that will make people feel better, but just as with religion, it doesn't get to the sources of that sort of misery in the first place. It in fact obfuscates it.

If you want to look at the rise of capitalist realism, one can also look at the decline of anti-psychiatry. As anti-psychiatry declined, then capitalist realism grew. I think there's a relation there between the two. That normalization of misery as part of the privatization of stress has been absolutely central to the rise of capitalist realism.

How do we get beyond that? Some kind of return to the issues that were raised by anti-psychiatry. I'm not saying necessarily that everything anti-psychiatry said was right. With anti-psychiatry, as with many other anti-authoritarian strands of leftism that emerged in the 60s – that kind of rhetoric became diverted and captured by the neoliberal right. When did anti-psychiatry cash-out? Well in some ways, Care in the Community, etc. But of course that wasn't the only way it could have gone. Thinking about ways of reforming, changing institutional care, of looking at a shift beyond this narrow kind of focus either on family background or the kind of chemical make-up of people's brains - this could have a very high impact, I think, if we could articulate this.

A reader of 'Capitalist Realism' actually drew my attention to the work of someone called David Smail, who's himself a kind of therapist - though I don't think he'd like the term 'therapist'. He, in a number of books, has sort of argued for the development of a leftist psychotherapy. Smail claims that feelings of well-being fundamentally arise from a public world - against the background of a public world. And in a society in which the concept of the public has been so kind of viciously and systematically attacked – it's no surprise, Smail argues, that distress has increased. He argues that – as I would – that the dominant forms of treatment in mental illness have reinforced that rather than challenged it. I think developing Smail's ideas could be extremely powerful.

***R: In the book you call French students involved in protests against neoliberalism 'immobilizers'. What does this term mean?***

M: It's a term I use myself, like 'immobilization' – to bring capitalism to a halt. I think the problem of articulating things in that way is that it feeds into the dominance of capitalist realism in the sense that it concedes that history belongs to capital or history is only going one way – Capital. And that all we can do is obstruct, resist or delay the inevitable triumph of capital. It seems to me there are obvious problems with that way of thinking. It's really still part of capitalist realism. It's part of capitalist realism in a very big way because we've lost any sense that the future is ours, that we can move forward to a future that we're constructing. Instead all we're doing is putting up barricades against a future that we ourselves are conceding belongs to capital.

***R: How did the student protests in Britain differ from that?***



I'm not sure that they did differ that much from it. As with many leftwing protests, there's a strong sense of what they're against, but not so much sense of what is wanted. What's encouraging about it for me is that at least the British young have broken out of that kind of pull of what's conventionally called 'apathy', but I don't like that term at all. In the book I use the term 'reflexive impotence', which I think is a better sense of what's at stake with many British young. Why I called it reflexive impotence is that people feel they can't do anything, and they're sort of aware that their feelings that they can't do anything mean that they can't do anything, or contribute even more to the inability to actually act, yet it still doesn't enable them to act. Reflexive impotence is another phrase for depression, I think. That's how a depressive person feels. They know that their own attitudes are reinforcing their own inability to do anything, and also making them feel worse. Yet knowing that is not likely to inspire them to act. Instead it makes them more and more depressed. I think that sums up the situation for the British young or large swathes of the British young up to 2008.

I guess what's also encouraging about the student protests is that politics becomes an available option. I think the level of so-called depoliticization was so strong amongst the young that even sort of failed or flawed forms of politicization are encouraging because I think part of depression and part of the depression I was talking about really is the disappearance of politics as such. Many young people in Britain who take capitalist realism for granted don't see much of a future for themselves, don't see a very interesting future for themselves. At best they'll be indebted in order to get a job that isn't very exciting – that's probably how they're seeing things. And the idea that one can challenge this politically – I don't think for many of them that it was available as a thought. Making it available again was what was encouraging about student militancy.

***R: Do you think more and more students are breaking out of the bounds of capitalist realism and becoming more radical?***

M: I think it is early days. There's all kinds of things going on. I think student militancy - the emergence of it - is something that wouldn't have happened before 2008. After the bank crisis of 2008 – this is a major event, kind of major trauma, for Capital, and of course we're still right in the middle of it. And it's evident that Capital does not have a solution to the problems which lead up to the bank crises of 2008 at all. I think student militancy is one dimension of it, the riots are another. But I think that these are really the beginnings of something and we don't know where it's going to go at all.

And it's a shame in a way that this massive efflorescence of student militancy before Christmas last year dissipated and wasn't able to be sustained during this year. That doesn't mean that it's gone away. I think certainly over the next course of the month or so, building up to November – in November there's going to be another big flash point. A lot of the people who have been politicized by what happened last year will be back again.

The thing is things move so quickly. There's a strange rhythm of events at the moment where you have this massive rush of unpredictable kinds of events occurring. I think that's what happened with student militancy at the end of last year, then earlier this year we had the whole Murdoch thing, and then the riots. These things erupt in an unexpected way, in a way that goes far further than people would anticipate before they happen. But then things seem to go back to normal, seem to stabilize

again. But every time things go back to normal, so-called normal, then normality is much more unstable, I think, than it was before. This tendency of collapse at the moment, with what we're living through, is the disintegration of the reality system, quite simply.

Something that has been built up for over 25 years, i.e. capitalist realism, in the neoliberal mode – since that has been so pervasive, since that has dominated all of the assumptions of institutional and organizational life as well as the unconscious, it's not surprising that it doesn't collapse all in one go. People's expectations, everything they take for granted, is shaped by that reality system – that in itself keeps it going for some period. But at the same time, we can see it really rocking at the moment. I think there's the opportunity for the left at this time. I think, yes, we need things to get radical, but we also need to get hold of the mainstream. This is where we're totally disconnected. It's not only that we are totally disconnected from the 'mainstream,' so-called. I mean I use the mainstream in inverted commas, because precisely at moments like this we don't know what the mainstream can be. We've known what it was up to 2008.

Part of the book 'Capitalist Realism' is really about the massive decline of mainstream media, mainstream culture, under the kind of tyranny of capitalist realism. I just don't think we know what mainstream media or mainstream politics can be like in the coming period because everything is up for grabs again. We can see that severe crisis that the ruling class is in, in the UK, which was made clear by the so-called Hackgate thing – a network of complicity between the media and the police and politicians, which David Cameron had to admit he was right in the middle of. Now you'd think that would provide an opportunity for the left, but the problem is there's no presence in the mainstream, no agent that can press home this clear advantage. And that's been quite clearly the case since 2008.

***R: How can the left hope to establish a presence in the mainstream media when it almost completely excludes genuinely left voices?***

M: I don't think it's inevitable that they would be excluded. I think it's a mistake to think the form of mainstream media is fixed – that that kind of neoliberal attuned mainstream media with its very narrow bandwidth, with very low expectations that it has of its audience. This was something that was imposed gradually. It is something that was fought for and achieved by neoliberals and their allies in big business. But it's a hegemonic struggle and media and mainstream politics are terrain – which the political right have dominated to the extent that people forget that there's ever anything different to this. But I don't think we can say in advance what will be excluded and what won't be excluded. For instance, with the Labour party, you can still see them acting as if it was before 2008, still acting as if the old so-called centre ground still existed. But it just doesn't exist anymore and no one's testing this out – that's the problem. No one is testing out what would happen if you tried to take a more leftwing perspective in the mainstream media.

Since Ed Milliband and the post- New Labour Labour party has decided to pitch things towards some obsolete centre-ground, we just don't know what would happen. And I think that's what needs to be tested out at the moment. It's quite clear that we're facing a dilemma, that the UK - we've seen with the riots and we've seen with the student militancy is these kinds of fissures in UK society that we haven't seen to this extent since maybe the poll-tax riots or, even earlier than that, the miners' strike. I think capitalist realist hegemony depended upon this kind of production of consensus - or

rather image of consensus - that had to be kind of continually reproduced by the media. Even when the media is condemning riots or condemning student protests, nevertheless they are visible - the visible cracks in this form of consensus or, like I said, appearance of consensus. So, like I say, we just don't know what's going to happen at this stage and we shouldn't concede any terrain to the enemies especially at this time really.

***R: It's not in the interest of the mainstream media to encourage people to question capitalism, though, is it? Newspapers, for example, are profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people.***

M: That's defeatist because we can't go anywhere without - either the media is reformed or we actually compete on terrain which is not favourable to us. I don't think this means we ought to concede to it, I think. Reading Nick Davis's book, 'Flat Earth News' - it's very interesting. It does vindicate everything you've said with newspapers. 60% of broadsheet content comes from PR. But I guess that what's interesting about that though is that isn't that the owners of the newspapers collude with the PR companies as such. It's more that it's a direct consequence of under funding of journalism. Journalists are required to turn around 10 stories a day. They won't be out on the streets doing investigative reporting. They'll be editing press releases.

But I think this is susceptible to influence by us as well - what Davis calls these 'astro-turf' groups, as a play on the idea of grass roots organization. So a lot of things which appear in the paper as if they'd come from grass roots organizations in fact come from these corporate astro-turf PR bodies or whatever. We need our own astro-turf bodies as it were to compete into this ecology. What gives us hope here is the fact that there isn't a strong agenda being pushed by these journalists, that they'll accept anything that comes into the inbox if it's pushed there with sufficient kind of vigour. I still think a lot of journalism is kind of opportunistic, and it's a question of our organizing to intervene into this kind of ecology.

We've seen examples recently of Owen Jones, though - Owen Jones has got in all kinds of media on the back of 'Chavs'. He's appeared on 'Daybreak', 'Sky News' - right in the heart of this kind of corporate beast. So it can be done. I don't think we can a priori say what can be achieved at this time. Capital is in disarray, the ruling class is in disarray at the moment, and I think that if we give up in advance and say, 'We'll never get into mainstream media', then we're doing them a favour. Of course the other danger is simply constructing everything so we adapt to the existing structures of mainstream media. That's also fatal - toning things down so that we can be accepted. It's about a hegemonic struggle so that we can change what is acceptable to say on there. And if we can't do that then we have failed. That's pretty clear and New Labour is the most objective lesson in that. If you simply construct your project on the basis of what is now acceptable in the mainstream and maybe just slightly shifting things over - that will fail.

And not only fail, but will also produce this kind of political despondency such as I tried to describe in the book really. I think we have to go between these two strategies - either staying outside the mainstream media completely or just adapting to what the mainstream media is like now. We have to learn lessons for neoliberals, really, I think. They were capable of changing what the media was in the same way we have to imagine that the media can change in our direction. Of course they've got resources we haven't got. But we've got resources they haven't got as well.

Going back to what I was saying earlier on: We should be inspired to the extent to which the triumph of neoliberalism in a way, showing how things can go from impossible to inevitable. That's the way history goes – that things seem completely off the agenda, that there's no way that things can happen; suddenly, things switch where they're the only thing that can happen. That's how it was with neoliberalism. The one thing we can be sure of at the moment is that things can't go back to how they were before 2008. That can't happen. We're in a period of major tumult, major change. The right, the kind of neoliberal right, is at its weakest since I can remember.

And we need to think ahead I think about how things can be different. And media is really a key part of that. I think it's really significant that the Hackgate thing happened this year, because it's part of this delegitimation process, you might say. The delegitimation process has at least two aspects. I think one is the discrediting of neoliberalism, although neoliberalism is quite plainly going to continue as a kind of guiding set of defaults for a while yet. As a political programme with a kind of confidence, it disintegrated after 2008. So we're in this kind of vacuum at the moment where neoliberalism has effectively collapsed, but nothing has come to replace it. That is an opportunity.

***R: In your book you say that the anti-capitalist protests do nothing more than provide a “carnavalesque background noise to capitalist realism”. Could you explain why?***

M: There's this spectacular dimension to anti-capitalist protests – this purely petitionary dimension to it. My problem with the anti-capitalist thing in a sense is that there's nobody who can meet the demands that are being put forward there. It has the form of petition, but there's no one to whom this petition is actually aimed. That's what's peculiar about it. Let's imagine at one of these G20 protests - let's imagine everyone inside the G20 goes, 'Well, okay, we've heard this noise. We've heard these slogans. That's it. We agree that capitalism is really a bad system.' Then what? Even if everybody inside the G20 meeting agreed with that, they still couldn't do anything. It's this peculiar form of spectacular petition, which I think does not expect to win because there is no model of what it would be like to win, as it were. This is not to say that nothing went on there and those protests were completely valueless or insincere. But I do think we need a concept of failure on the left. I think that one thing that separates the neoliberal right from the left is that there's much less tolerance of failure on the neoliberal right.

I think built into many of these movements is a kind of inbuilt expectation of failure, so that it's not a problem if things actually fail. With the student thing there was at least – although it actually did fail, it could have succeeded, at least theoretically. It had a determinate aim. The people they were exerting pressure on had the power to make the decision not to impose those student fees, etc. Unless there are determinate winnable goals, a kind of generalised despondency will result. It's what my comrade Alex Williams calls 'feel-good, feel-bad'. You feel good because you're out in a protest doing something. But ultimately you feel bad because – and these two things are completely sutured together, the feel-good and the feel-bad – you feel bad because you don't expect to achieve anything ever. It's just a kind of carnival of the defeated. It's those aspects that I think are troubling about that kind of protest.

As I say, the student protest was different because they had a determinate goal that produced this criterion of success and failure. Also: because of the sustained nature of it. There wasn't just

something over in a day. It was something over a period of weeks. It built up and had managed to embed itself in the structure of universities, by the occupations. That produces a very different dynamic to a kind of anti-capitalist carnival that happens for a day or a short period of time. The problem ultimately was that, as we discussed earlier, that did fizzle out. I think that then just poses different challenges about how – since people have been politicized by that issue – how do we sustain that kind of struggle over a longer period, and how do we keep it embedded into everyday life. I think that link between people's working life, or the life of students, and politics is crucial – that politics is not something that is just performed by a professional class of administrators at some spectacular distance. It's something that directly connects with how we live and work. I think that that was the power of the student protests by contrast with the 90s-2000s anti-capitalism - although I'm not suggesting a total discontinuity there.

It seems to me that trade unions were successful in the past, as I've said, because of Fordism, the collapse of Fordism. That's made the way trade unions operate more difficult. But that doesn't mean that no form of workers organization couldn't work effectively now. But I do think we need imagination and a real shift from the Fordist paradigm. Having been an active trade union member in points in my life, I've seen the extent to which higher echelons of trade unions are still orientated around – many of them are still orientated around Fordism, around pay and strikes. I saw this particularly with teaching. Many of the issues that I describe in the book – the problems of observations, of bureaucracy, of self-surveillance – these are things that teachers are kind of passionate about, which unions have a very limited interest in. I think shifting the terrain of struggle onto things that matter to people is a way of re-engaging them. There's no reason, in my view, why trade unions themselves couldn't become major players again if they're prepared to shift, very belatedly, into the Post-Fordist world.

***R: Is the occupy movement taking place in America at the moment doing nothing more than providing a “carnavalesque background noise to capitalism”?***

M: Part of what makes things different now from how they were in the past, just is the fact that the bank crisis has happened and that Capital is on the back foot. There's an element of petitionary acting out with those forms of anti-capitalism that I describe in the book. In the situation where capital is much weaker – but also the situation is much more desperate, I think – that has created a different set of situations where, you know, 'What are people to do faced with this kind of ongoing train wreck of the financial system?' There's a sense that anything thrown in front of that train is good at this time. We simply don't know, I think, how far things will spread, how things will develop in conditions as they are now as opposed to what they were like at the end of the 20th century, at the beginning of the 21st century. It seems to me that these negative protest-based movements – if they're to have any lasting impact – must transform into robust organizations that have institutional structures and a positive agenda. But I don't think that we can rule that out at this stage. We just don't know what's going to happen.

***R: Some have argued that one of wonderful things about the movement is its lack of a central organizing system because it's bringing together all kinds of people with different problems.***

M: Okay, that's a resource. But I think organization is required, though, because otherwise how do we compete with Capital? I think capital is quite happy facing people who are not that organized. It's good to have a broad-based group of people. But there was a broad-based opposition to the Iraq war – and that's a major moment of capitalist realism, I think, in the UK. When you have however many millions out in the streets in the UK and nothing happened. That shows that sheer numbers of people don't necessarily accomplish anything. I think you only accomplish anything when you've got organization, goals, and structures in the end. Otherwise you've just got some faith in a kind of spontaneity of the people somehow. When has that ever yielded anything? You're not up against things which are susceptible to spontaneity. There's a difference between capitalism and other forms of kind of political social dominance, isn't there? We can't just take all of the capitalists out and execute them. Capitalism is a structure – it's as much a cognitive structure as it is a social structure. You can't just take out the ruling class. Even imagine this was the case, imagine it was possible – you can't just take out the ruling class and have got rid of it. Difficult questions are: How do we organize life differently? How do we organize the economy in a way that's different from the way that capitalism has done? That's not solved by executing capitalists.

***R: What do you think a post-capitalist society look like?***

M: I'm not sure we're even close to answering that question at the moment, to be honest. I'm not saying that in a defeatist way. In a way it's partly a testament to the power of capitalist realism. We have to start by granting the power that it has over our imaginations, over our social, political, and economic imaginations. Part of that power is the way it structures oppositions in our minds, so that you think there's this deadlock between either we've got state centralisation or neoliberalism. It's imperative that we think beyond this deadlock, I think, so that when we're arguing against neoliberal capitalism, then we're not implicitly arguing to go back to social democracy or back to a Stalinist state. We might want to go back to elements of social democracy. But it's not going to be enough to say that we just want to retreat to how things were a few years ago. I think we need a sense of where we're going to. We can be somewhat emboldened here because it's not as if anyone's got a very clear idea of where things are going at the moment. And the one thing we can be certain of is that they won't carry on as they have been. We need this boldness of imagination on our side, willingness to engage in thought experiments, science-fictional scenarios – because, quite honestly, they're just as likely as anything else that's going to happen.

***R: In the last chapter of the book you suggest that one way society can be improved is by establishing a 'paternalism without the Father'. Could you explain what you mean by this?***

M: That's one challenge to the impasses that we're in. As we were talking about the mainstream media – I do think media is crucial. One of the ways in which neoliberal hegemony has cemented itself is by an attack on paternalism, because it's saying paternalism is part of this obsolete, bureaucratic, centralizing, top-down, archaic world that we're glad to be rid of. What's involved in paternalism? Paternalism is other people telling you what you ought to do, and we – we neoliberals – don't believe in that; we believe that you should be able to choose for yourselves. Now this whole way of setting things up has, I think, been highly successful and for that reason deeply pernicious. They also associate paternalism with elitism, because they will say, 'Paternalism then is someone deciding for you what you ought to like and what you ought not to like.' One doesn't simply want to

reverse the terms there and accept the way the binary is set up. We need to think about how paternalism could be different from the image that neoliberalism has of it.

What's interesting to me is the way in which elements of paternalism do survive in neoliberal culture. The smoking ban, for instance. It quite clearly runs contrary to the way I was characterizing – one might say caricaturing – the neoliberal appeal. This is quite clearly stopping people from making choices. Paternalism survives in a kind of way in health. It doesn't survive in culture, and that's interesting. But it seemed to me that what was at stake in mass media when I was growing up, and the paternalistic dimension of it, wasn't people telling me what to do – they're assuming intelligence on my part. They're assuming that I can cope with things that I didn't already like.

There's this different model of desire that's at stake with how I would construct paternalism in a positive way – which isn't about just deciding for people what's good for them. It is about having a wager that there is maybe a desire for the strange in people – people don't already know what they want and that the things which they really end up most valuing maybe things which surprise them. What I'm arguing is that a lot of the features that neoliberalism, neoliberal culture claims for itself – which is innovation, the capacity to surprise, newness – none of these things are generated by neoliberal culture. The exact opposite is the case in fact. When you have a consumer model of 'choice' – in inverted commas – what you get is this kind of bland homogeneity, a faux-diversity, concealing an extremely narrow bandwidth of options.

What was it that actually did allow for there to be innovation, surprise, and novelty? Well, some kind of condition of stability and some kind of removal from immediate commercial pressures. That's how one could think about, particularly, how the BBC used to operate, how Channel 4 operated in its early days. Nothing is more illustrative, I think, the triumph of capitalist realism in the UK than Channel 4, which started off showing Tarkovsky seasons, had hour-long programmes simply consisting of philosophers discussing ideas – to 'Location, Location, Location' or whatever else is on Channel 4 at the moment. There's some massive decline that then produces this retrospective impossibilisation. That other Channel 4 did exist, but now it seems utterly impossible.

But it is only possible in some kind of model of paternalism – of thinking the best of people and thinking they deserve the best, not of serving up whatever people want, or whatever is held that people want. Part of the notion behind this for me would be the plasticity of desire. Neoliberalism wants to trap people in where they already are. This model of paternalism is about saying people are capable of being stranger, of liking things which they don't know at the moment that they would like. That's the side that we should be on – is in inculcating this. Of course, for me, as a teacher, there's a kind of flatness, I think, between this concept of paternalism and teaching. Surely teaching must involve this kind of wager – that the student can enjoy things which are alien to them. That's some of the issues for me about how to think of paternalism differently.

The reason I don't like the term paternalism is the association with familialism – patriarchy, etc. It's very difficult to think of a word that would work in the same way. That's probably part of the conceptual poverty brought about by capitalist realism – that we're forced back onto this word that in many ways is unsatisfactory. Recently, I've done a pamphlet with Jeremy Gillwell, which will be coming out through Compass. There we use the term 'democratic paternalism', partly drawing upon Raymond Williams's work in his book – I think it's 1961 – 'Communications'.

William's presciently discusses different models of broadcasting. You start of with an authoritarian one, move towards a paternalistic one, and then that breaks down under pressure from things like the commercial model. What Williams wants is a democratic model where everyone participates in the production of media. I think that we can't just directly go there. We need this kind of democratic paternalism. The goal is more participation than production. The paternalistic dimension is just acknowledges the fact that there are asymmetries of kind of power, knowledge, etc. But the democratic side say we can't be satisfied with these differences in power, knowledge – we must aim towards equalling them out. That's how I'd like to think about the political project – as one of democratic paternalism.

One of the problems with paternalism in the way it had traditionally been set up was that that was an elite body that could sit and decide what was good for everybody. There isn't going to be in any desirable system in the future – there isn't going to be one body that will decide for everybody what is good for the rest of them. There's already a plurality of different kinds of knowledge bases and skill bases, etc., which will mean that that is avoided.

Part of what's involved in re-floating this concept of paternalism is defending the concept of education, and also defending the concept of authority; and differentiating the concept of authority from that of authoritarianism. Authority based on expertise, knowledge, skills – there's nothing wrong with that, providing it isn't abused. That needs to be abused to authoritarianism, which is simply power based on fear. Part of a democratic political project is not eliminating authority, but constituting authority collectively. The best way of fighting authoritarianism is not abandoning the question of authority - which will always re-assert itself in one form or another, if one simply ignores it - but of constituting authority in this collective way. I think that returns to this challenge I was suggesting right at the start of the interview – that we need to now face up to again, which is this question of how do we develop an anti-authoritarian left. Like I said, the question was posed in some ways in the 70s and the 80s. Now we have to answer it.

***R: What's to stop a paternalistic state from becoming a totalitarian one?***

M: I think I sort of partly answered that by... Totalitarianism is authoritarianism - authority simply being asserted on the basis of fiat. And I think that would be very different from the model of authority – the paternalistic model of authority – that I was suggesting. That's why, I think, you need definite democratic paternalism, rather than just paternalism per se. I'm not really saying anything that different from how some teaching situation would operate, for instance, where one can't simply impose stuff on the students and expect them to accept it. You have to negotiate with them, you have to win them over, to start from the level they're at, etc.

***R: And if you can't do that, what do you do then?***

M: If we can't do that, then we're in a severe crisis at that point. What are the situations where you can't do that? All I'm saying is that an authoritarian solution won't help. If you can't bring people round in that situation, then there maybe nothing you can do. But simply returning to some kind of authoritarian solution where you just tell them – that would only exacerbate the problems, it won't solve them. I think we'd have to bet on the fact that this sort of can be done and you can bring



people with you. At a point where we're forcing people to do things, things have already gone wrong very severely.

Let me put it another way: I think we're very far off leftist totalitarianism at the moment, and we're too frightened of it as well. In the 60s, Stalinism was a clear and present danger. Leftist totalitarianism was a real threat that people were trying to escape from. It simply isn't now. It's not that one should entirely dismiss those fears, but I think that we're at the stage where we need to establish a new orthodoxy, a strong hegemonic presence, and once we've done that, then we can worry about the dangers of that being taken too far or totalitarianism, etc.

But I just don't see that as an issue at this time. What's more of an issue is the kind of soft totalitarianism of neoliberal dictatorship, isn't it? I don't use those terms lightly. This situation where people – where there's a rhetoric of choice and no effective political choice, where there's a general kind of helplessness and people feel they've got no control over their lives – it seems to me that these are what we need to fight against. I've never been able to force a student to do anything anyway. Let's say there was the full resources of the military and prison service available to me, I wouldn't still be able to bend the student, still, in that way. If things have gone past the point of negotiation where you can't, as it were, manipulate people in their own interests, then that's a severely extreme situation.

***R: Another thing you say needs to happen is for the left to “not take over the state but [to] subordinate it to the general will”.***

M: Yeah. Neoliberals don't really have to run the state as such themselves. They get their subordinates to do it. The state is clearly an important locus of power. We get some theories which already right off the state and I think that is a mistake. It's quite clear that neoliberalism could not have achieved the hegemony it has without also being able to control states. So I think the state remains an important locus of power.

It's just the idea of taking over the state, in a way, in the classic style of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, etc. – even if you could do that, that wouldn't achieve the overthrow of capitalism anyway, partly because capitalism is a global phenomenon. It itself is in the position I say – it subordinates the state. It doesn't have to takeover the state directly. Partly what I was thinking there is that we want to differentiate ourselves from being old style statist. This is again part of this neoliberal binary where they're for a small state, we're for a big state. I think we need to first distinguish the concept of the public from the concept of the state. The two aren't the same – the state facilitates public space, but is not the same as the public. The public interest is not synonymous with the kind of will of the state. Partly the importance of this move is to differentiate us from the caricature of the old left. But at the same time it's important not to go down a certain kind of anarchist route where you're denying the importance of the state at all. The state quite clearly retains a massive significance.

***R: How do you get the state to serve the people?***

M: Why does parliamentary politics serve the interest of business? Because business is the only effective agent acting upon it. The point is: Why is capitalist realism rife in parliamentary politics?

You can't explain that in terms of the logic of parliamentary politics itself. Parliamentary politics is in many ways responding to the situation outside it, such as the decline of trade unions, etc. The classic situation of the 70s was where the politicians were caught between business on the one hand and trade unions on the other. What we need to do is constitute a force outside of parliament strong enough that it becomes a dominant influence on parliament.

Again: learn from neoliberalism. It doesn't control parliament because it has its own people directly in there, though that might to some extent be true. The point is that even if that were true, how is it possible? It's possible because of the constitution of forces inside society, isn't it? That's it at its basic behaviourist level, I think. Politicians and administrators will bow to the strongest force in a certain way. Then what we need in the first instance is to create conflict in their own minds. At the moment, it's just all too easy to bow down to business, because it's only powerful force acting upon them. There's a widespread, inchoate discontent, for instance, about the banks – and since there's no agent that's capable of focusing that discontent and bringing it to bear on politicians, then they can ignore it – they just make a few moralising gestures towards it. To me it's a question of how you constitute those extra parliamentary forces, how we produce these new forms of solidarity.

***R: But business has a very fixed set of things it wants, whereas the public want a multitude of different things, don't they?***

M: That's why I do think we at least need some determinate set of demands, at least provisionally, because otherwise things just dissipate. Unless we've got a set of demands of that sort, and some kind of model for a new orthodoxy – that's the thing about the mainstream – a model for what we want the mainstream to look like. If we don't have that, then those, as you say, specific determinate demands that business has will continue to dominate.

***R: In the last chapter of 'Capitalist Realism' you also say that strikes in public services are self-defeating. Could you explain why?***

M: I think things have changed – the strikes earlier on this year, the TUC one and all of that, and the action that's coming up in November. There's a difference there because it approaches them all almost like a general strike. It's not just that teachers are out, but the whole of the public sector. I'm still suspicious of one-day strikes, of just how effective they can be. Unless the discontent and militancy spreads beyond that one day – it's very easy to contain a one-day strike. As happened in the FE college where I worked – you get this farcical situation where the principle, on a 120 grand, would come down and hand-out coffee to the people picketing, because everyone will claim to be on the side of the workers – because it doesn't really cost anything. Rather, it costs us stuff – it costs the workers their wages for the day. It doesn't really cause any lasting damage to the institution – that kind of action. Certainly they can easily plan for and, indeed, in many ways welcome it, because it lowers the wage bill for the year.

I wouldn't want to make a definitive statement about the modern day situation now. But I think we need to think about winning hegemonic influence again. Why have nurses got more status than teachers? It's partly that nurses often go on strike. It's not that one should pander to the image of them in the media, but at the same that's where we're starting from and why we have to struggle against it. Given that the media will use all of its weapons to produce what Alex Williams calls

'negative solidarity' – turning one set of workers against another. With a one-day strike with teachers – the classic or standard line from the media is, 'Well look at how the teachers are inconveniencing the rest of the workforce, of childcare and all of that.' I think we just have to think of the long-term strategic consequences of these things.

I hope that if one-day strikes happen they would work, but I just think that too often they haven't worked. Rather than just kind of going over and over these things that have failed, keep doing them, is to look at different forms of disruption – things which actually inconvenience management. Like I say, in terms of teaching – why do things that inconvenience the students? Or if it's children: Why inconvenience the pupils and the parents? Why not do something that only inconveniences management? I think the benefit of the kinds of refusal that would be invisible to the students, pupils, parents, etc., is that they show the absolute uselessness of this kind of bureaucratic work and the extraneous nature of managerialism. If one refuses to collaborate with certain managerial initiatives, one can perfectly well carry on teaching – just cause problems for management. I think more imagination about targeting disruption on those who you want it to hurt would be good.

***R: I interviewed Keith Farnish several weeks ago about his book, 'Time's Up!' In it, he argues that the only way to prevent global ecological collapse and thus ensure the survival of humanity is to rid the world of Industrial Civilization. Do you have any thoughts on this?***

M: If that is true it's very depressing. That's not a reason to object to it in itself, I suppose. We need to hold onto a model of the future. That's something I want to retain from Marxism, actually – is a kind of technocratic vision of the future. It doesn't mean it has to be one that's completely indifferent to the environment. I suppose that I am one of those people he would attack in the sense that what I would hope for is that there's a managed solution to these things that would involve technology. As I sort of mention in the book about rationing – I don't see a problem with a rationing of resources at some point. But I don't see that as necessarily meaning that we would be immiserated. People are always bleating on about the Second World War, how great that was, about how great people felt during the time of rationing, and sort of how healthy people were as well. I think we've seen in a sense the results of the opposite of that –that having unlimited access to things doesn't produce well-being or happiness. On the contrary, it produces a kind of generalised misery I think. I don't have any problem with an idea of a rationing of resource at some point, which I think could be part of the solution here. But I do still believe civilization is possible. I think the question is: How are things to be managed? Part of what I want to argue for is a defence of the concept of management as opposed to managerialism. It seems to me that the only solution to the environmental catastrophe is a managed one or we're already betting on the catastrophe already having happened, or already acting like the catastrophe already has happened. I find libidinally alienating these visions of a sort of return to organic societies, little villages.

***R: Some might argue that such societies would be less alienating than what we have at present because they offer a face-to-face social existence.***

M: I think there are severe problems at a libidinal level, like that - There's a reason that people don't want face-to-face contact. Sometimes there's a value in face-to-face contact. There's also a value in impersonality. The achievement of an urban modernity was the ability not to have to deal with face-to-face contact all the time. I really think this is deeply dubious line – because I suspect what is

behind the claim that it has to be like this and that civilization can't carry on is this kind of death-wish and this desire to take us back to the kind of conditions of a medieval world.

***R: Those making the claim would probably argue that the death-wish is civilization itself which is heading towards self-destruction.***

M: Fair enough. I can see that – but there's two deaths here I think, neither of which I want. I really want to avoid this binary that either we're going back to something which I think people – there's a drive to escape those conditions that you can't put back in a box. The only way of eliminating the desires for impersonality, for homogeneity, for mass production – the only way of ending the desires for that is by a post-traumatic forgetting I think. Otherwise those desires will maintain.

I think there's nothing wrong with those desires actually. This makes me a Marxist I think, but I believe in mass production, of coordination, etc. Marx is somewhat sanguine about many of the issues that we wouldn't be anymore because of – there's this Promethean model of extracting resources from the Earth, and this kind of model of practice that was about converting the inert mater into something useful for us or whatever. I think we are rightly now somewhat suspicious of that kind of Promethean drive that's indifferent to the depletion of resources, etc. Okay, so there's a kind of death logic of that Prometheanism, which just uses up all the resources. But we don't want to be forced between these two deaths, I think – a death of modernity and a kind of return to village life. 'The idiocy of rural life' – that's the great phrase from Marx and Engels. The issue for me is how to commensurate an environmental agenda with modernity, with the desires for mass production, for the homogenous, for the generic. I wouldn't think these things are the only things that should go on in culture. But an important element of culture which I think is crucial to maintain.

***R: Won't mass production end if you end capitalism? Don't the two go hand in hand?***

M: I don't think we have to see things in that way. What interests me is almost the opposite – the way we see elements of communism erupting in capitalism, at the point of highest capitalist triumph. Like I always say about 'Starbucks' – 'Starbucks' shows the desire for communism because everything attributed to 'Starbucks' is everything that was said about communism – that it is homogenous, it's generic, etc., etc. What do people want from 'Starbucks'? Not the coffee – well, I hope not because it's horrible. They want from it something that is familiar, that's generic – that is a form of public space, kind of homogenous public space. We can argue that post-capitalism can deliver this better and cheaper than 'Starbucks' does. The desire for public space, the desire for the homogenous and replicated can be synonymous. But all we've got at the moment is degraded versions of it, such as 'Starbucks'.

There's no reason to think that mass production is just a feature of capitalism. You know we've got robots and stuff. This is one of the concrete challenges about how we would construct an economy without capitalism. The difference between me and my line of and certain kinds of anarchistic approaches, I suppose, is that I just agree with Marx, where the global triumph of capitalism is the pre-condition for post-capitalism. If capitalism is global, then we need also to be global or sufficiently global. It's not like capitalism operates by global government, but it has sufficient systems to coordinate its activities around the world which minimize the effectiveness of anti-capitalist struggle. I think we need similar systems of global coordination, and I think that can involve resource

management so that we most effectively use it, so resources are used in the most effective way. I think condemning us back into this world of literary dark ages, where we're in tiny villages and we have a limited sense of the world around us is a horrific prospect. I still maintain a hope of a rationally organized post-capitalist civilization.

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***The address of Mark Fisher's blog 'K-Punk' is: [www.k-punk.abstractdynamics.org](http://www.k-punk.abstractdynamics.org)***

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***Thank you for listening.***

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